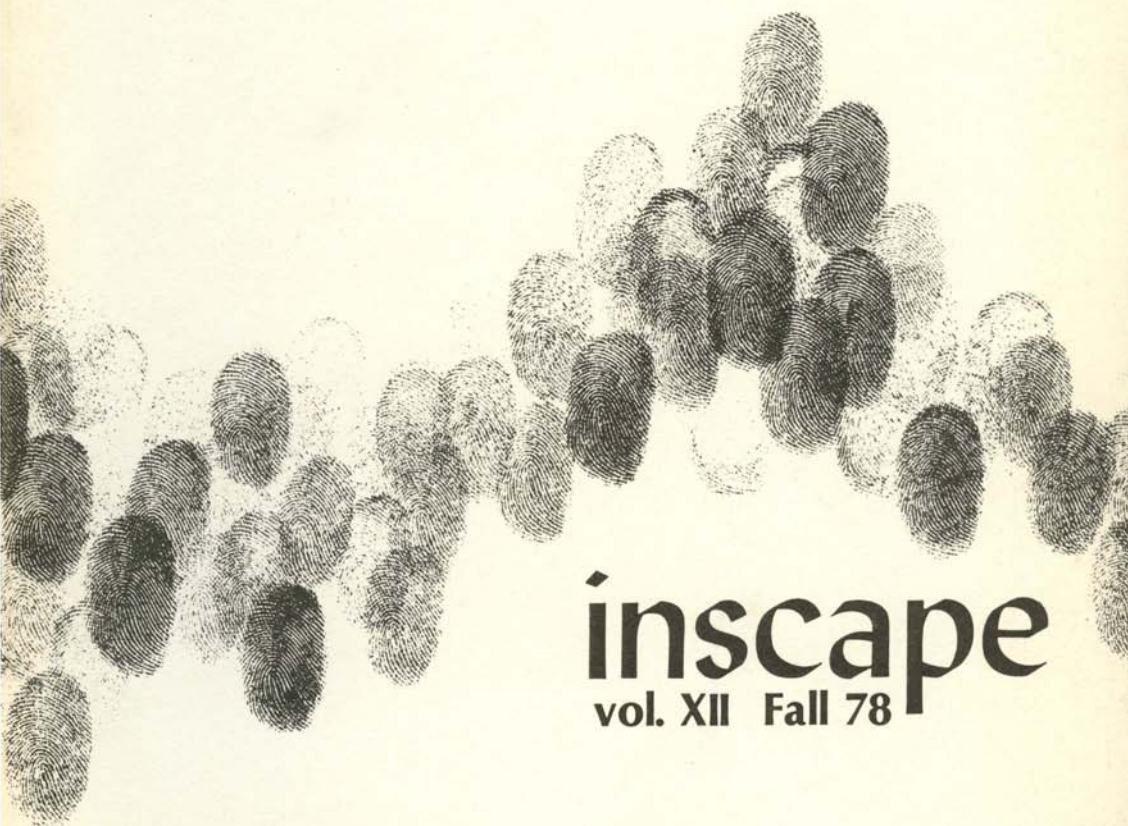


Archeves



inscape
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CONTRIBUTORS

Anthony Lococo	1, 9, 34, 45
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Giving Man His Proper Due

Anthony Lococo

A mockingbird perched himself
Upon a lower branch
And called to man below
In sympathetic voice,
"I pity such as you that clutch the earth,
As if afraid of falling off."

The man who had amused himself
With thoughts of immortality, turned
With angry glare and shook a fist
With this admonishment,
"I am a man you foolish bird,
Respect me as I'm due."

The bird in mock astonishment,
Cocked his head and called,
"Where, oh mighty sir, is your golden crown?
Perhaps you left it in the field,
Beneath your sweating brow."

The man became enraged at this,
And flung an ancient stick.
"You haughty bird," he cried,
"I'll have no disrespect.
Give me what I'm due."

The bird flapped above the futile stick,
And preened himself above the man.
"I know what such as I
Can give to such as you,
That would suffice your worth."

With that the bird did fly,
While pompous man cleaned out his eye.

On the Beach

Greg Loomis

Brawny boys will thump
and shout, calling to oily ladies
who lie about on sand, flailing
like beached porpoises.

Multi-colored balls strike at waves
which lose their strength and die
away into foam;
while abalone shells are cast around
till auto tires roll and bury
them down to the bedrock.

Old leather women drift out to sea
bobbing helplessly on rubber,
drinking sun.

Gulls collide for pretzel crumbs
through screeching umbrellas,
while sweated groins mingle
in procession.

Far from shore a buoy leans,
pulled down by sucking barnacles:
a drunken sailor holding balance
by a thread.

Most Likely to Succeed

Jeff Wylie

The clock in his head went off with a clang
(Even before the one on the table)
And he jerked stark sweaty upright.
Half his nightmares were over.

His groping hand crunched cellophane.
And as he lit up, the steel band
Around his chest viced tighter, and he
Tried a little cough but couldn't.

He cheated back into the covers
A little and frowned over at the wife:
(How about a little drink baby, we
can, uh, get to know each other a little)

Maybe he'd call up FTD today.
Ding-dong roses with a smile
(Well things are stacked up
now but I promise I'll take
off and we'll get the kids and...)

Climbing the corporate ladder
Made him sick.
(But hey, let's have another day
Remember what they used to say
That Bright Future
Can always start tomorrow.)

SEASCAPE

Jeff Wylie

"It's so--so intense," said the young actress.

The man in the tweed suit nodded thoughtfully. He moved a bit closer, tilted his head to one side, and carefully scrutinized the painting. Yes, he thought, Clinton Duvall has reached the pinnacle of his career. His new work, "Seascape," was flawless: modern, almost stark in its simplicity, yet soulful and overpowering. No doubt about it, the man decided--it was the most magnificent painting he had ever seen.

The dozens of admirers that had gathered in the main exhibition room of the gallery obviously agreed. Some had been looking at the canvas for hours, peering closely to observe its minute details, then moving up, down, left, right, and to the far corners of the room to experience its splendor from every possible angle.

It was a striking painting, to be sure. An impressionistic work, it was composed almost entirely of bold horizontal strokes--predominantly gray throughout, with muted blues in the top half of the painting, and non-imposing violet hues in the lower half. Smaller patches of white were visible throughout. Its texture was dramatic, as seemingly endless layers of oils were used to create an almost engulfing depth. Now a herd of anxious spectators was staring at the painting, speculating among themselves as to its Great Meaning.

A girl in Army fatigues and sandals joined the group and began furiously chalking out curious-looking sketches in a spiral-bound pad. A rather substantial woman of about fifty appeared and produced a pair of rhinestone-speckled eyeglasses from her silk handbag. Perching them precariously on her nose, she leaned forward, her buxom frame bent at the waist, reverently examining every inch of the canvas. She remained motionless for several minutes, and except for occasional grunts of delight, said nothing. Finally, with some effort, she stood erect, snapped her glasses shut, and shoved them back into her handbag. "It's positively anachronistic," she announced.

"But what is it saying?" someone asked.

"What I'm saying," said the woman, misunderstanding the question, "is that this painting simply does not belong in this cultural era. It's simply beyond our full comprehension and appreciation." Out came the spectacles again. "I'm afraid that this work is making a statement that we are not yet prepared for. It's very--very--"

"Intense," supplied the young actress.

"But what is the artist trying to tell us?" asked the man in the tweed suit.

"Obviously," said the girl, setting down her sketch pad, "Duvall is attempting here to depict the spiritual void that is trapped within us all. Look how the storm looms ominously over the sea. The dominating murkiness of the sky, the wave-like textures of the clouds, all mirrored in the churning turbulence of the sea. My God, can't you see it? Duvall is restating the entire conflict of the cosmos--the violent, never-ending opposition of all natural forces to the inherent evil that pollutes our souls. "In short"--a dramatic pause--"man's inhumanity to mankind."

Everyone fell silent. They hadn't considered this.

"It seems to me," offered the man in the tweed suit, "that Duvall's use of color is of supreme importance. Look how he seems to be reversing the world's natural order. Yes--yes! Look here! And his use of perspective--look how the angles of the cloud formations force the eye toward the horizon and blend with the infinite movement of the waves. Brilliant!" Nods of approval swept the crowd.

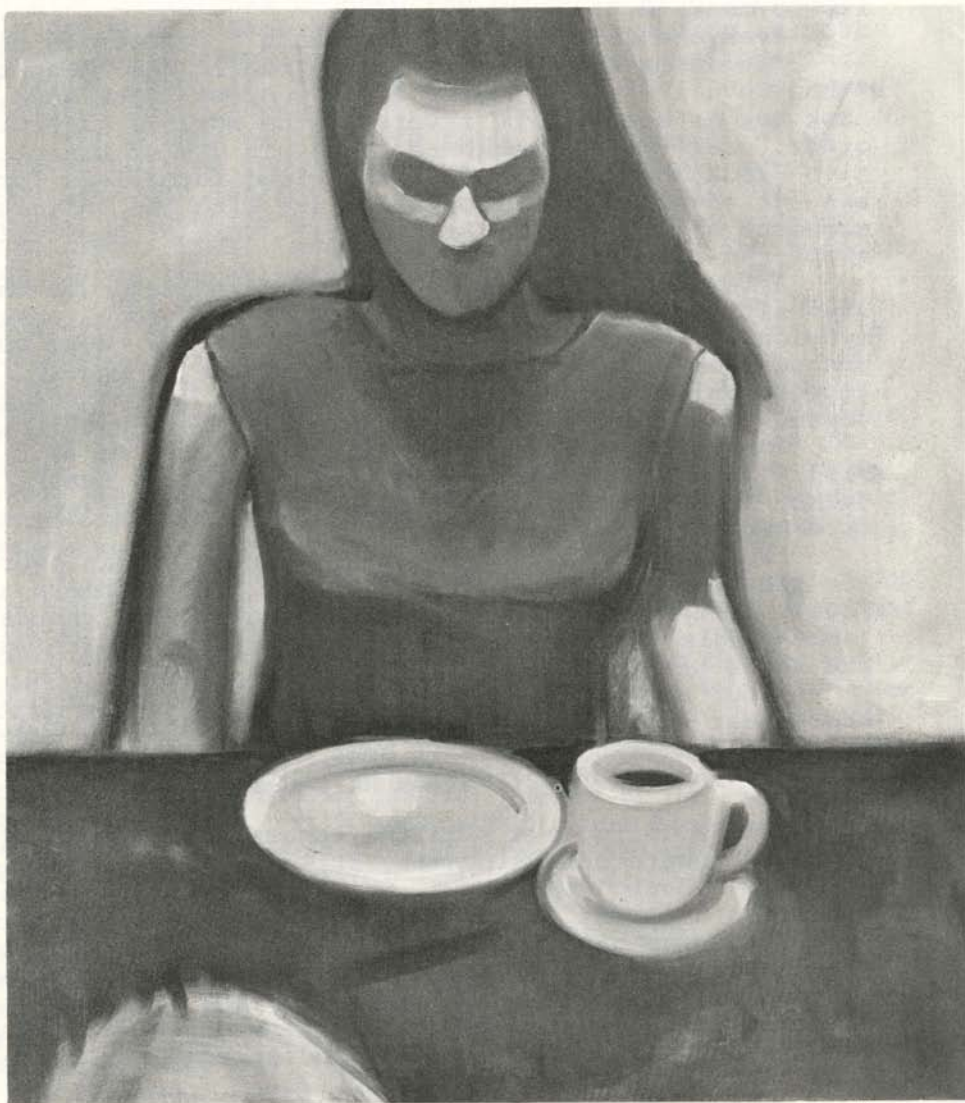
A few moments later, a bearded young man, who had been sitting quietly on a bench across the room, moved cautiously toward the spectators who, by now, were comprehensively discussing the latest trends in modern Impressionism. "You--young man," gushed the matronly woman. "What do you think of this marvelous work?"

The young man shifted a little. "Well, ma'am," he said, "I guess I'm not really sure." Several heads turned in astonishment. "I mean, it's kind of--well, it's kind of abstract, isn't it?"

"Young man," said the woman, staring at him over her glasses, "of course it's abstract. It's modern art. Really," she muttered, turning back toward the canvas, "some people will never understand anything." The young man shook his head and returned to the bench.

"Your attention, please," intoned a voice from somewhere near the ceiling. "It is now five o'clock and our gallery is closing. We will open again tomorrow at ten a.m. Thank you for visiting us and please stop by again."

With a collective sigh the spectators turned and migrated toward the main exit, still bubbling enthusiastically about "Seascape." The bearded young man sat alone for a moment, then slowly rose from the bench and approached the painting. He stood there for a moment, and then a smile of amusement and satisfaction covered Clinton Duvall's face. He carefully took down the painting and blew a speck of dust from one of its corners. Then, turning it right side up, he replaced it on the wall and walked toward the door.



Mike Goodlett

As the Next Plate Comes Up

Nancy Pfister

Her mind is a bobber floating on suds--
bubbles that pop as the next plate comes up.

Night moves tediously into morning, and
whirls her in space on an apron string, wringing

drops of recycled rain into tankards sinking
in auburn waters historical for oatmeal and pastrami.

Graphic windows leer back dirt duplicate looks,
laughing back the reflection of chipped melamine,

as the megaphone funnel echoes stale juice trickling
down a sucking whirlpool, leaving a stream of orange,

as it gurgles downward along with liquid dreams of more--
dissolving the particles that cling in false hope,

as she waits for the next plate to come up.



They never did fix that light at the corner o' Jackson an' Ormsby. They never wiped them marks off the alley back o' Lombardo's grocery either. Been two years since it happened an' I don't know why I thought things woulda changed. They never done nothin' before it happened, an' they ain't done nothin' since. Nothin' changes 'cept we all jus' grows older an' a hell of a lot more tired.

Wasn't always that way though. Time was when me an' Cat coulda swiped some apples from that fat German lady on 17th street an' sold 'em to the whores on Market. Then we'd buy some good stuff. Stuff that burned goin' down and burned your guts, an' made you feel real quiet and numb, like no one could hurt you if they tried, an' no one could, 'cause me an' Cat, we liked the way things was.

Me an' Cat (I always called him Cat 'cause his real name was Catfish), we never hurt no one, 'cept maybe that German lady, an' we never took that money from Lombardo's even if that bastard Gillespie did hate us. Sometimes I sit back real quiet an' think about what happened. My throat starts to swell up and my chest feels heavy, like someone was sittin' on it. I don't guess I'll ever forget what happened, an' I know for sure I ain't gonna ever understand it.

That afternoon I was standin' in front of Antoine's Deli, talkin' to Sandy. Sandy's one of them whores that don't look like she ought to be one. Real cute face, with freckles on her nose an' short, blonde hair. You know, the kind that you see sittin' in a drugstore pourin' milkshakes or somethin'.

Anyway she ain't a bit dumb an' knows jus' when to turn them two faces on. One face for when she's talkin' to Gillespie, an' another when she's talkin' to a john.

"What's goin' on Sandy?" I asked.

"Things is slow, Polo. Rain last night hurt like hell."

I walked over to the milk crate in front of the Deli an' sat down.

"Sides the rain, my feet feels like somebody's been jumpin' up an' down on 'em."

"Gillespie been hasslin' ya?"

"Polo, you know that two-faced idiot ain't gonna hassle me. He likes what he sees, an' anyway he's too busy tryin' to bust real hard-cores like you an' Cat."

She gave me one of those cute grins and turned slowly down the street. I sat for a minute rubbin' the soles of my shoes against the concrete and smellin' the cookin' inside Antoine's. The bread smell crawled inside my lungs and laid there makin' my stomach ache. I knew there was no sense askin' for a handout, an' besides, me an' Cat was gonna get a bottle that night.

We was gonna feel good an' full and to hell with the bread. Wouldn't take no bread if they handed it to me. Better believe it. Me an' Cat, we was buddies and we was gonna feel good that night.

I picked myself up off o' that crate an' moved on down the street toward Jimson's Pool Hall. When I pushed the door with the red, painted letters, a bell banged against the door. It was dark inside, cause the windows was painted black, an' I couldn't see for a couple o' minutes.

"How's it goin', Shakey?" I asked.

He turned and nodded his head at me.

Shakey weighed almost three hundred pounds an' didn't talk to nobody 'cept maybe to catch some sucker thinkin' he was cool.

I walked over to a black corner of the room jus' next to the bar. Wasn't no need for light. I knowed Cat was sittin' there 'cause he was always sittin' there. Lots o' people thought Cat was crazy. Not me. Cat was jus' different an' a hell of a guy. The kind o' guy who you knew was gonna be there. Cat didn't talk much, an' jus' 'cause he liked sittin' in the pool place didn't mean he was crazy. Tol' me one time he jus' liked listenin' to fat Shakey hit the balls together. He liked the way one smacked up against the other. Liked the way they touched. Hard and solid. Real together and bangin' into each other, goin' all in different places, but none o' them balls goin' nowhere without bein' hit by the other. Them balls needed each other, an' wasn't none of 'em more important than the other. I never did understand what he meant by sayin' that, but it didn't matter much. We was buddies an' that was it.

Cat, he didn't hardly do nothin' 'cept sit at Jimson's. Took all I had to get him to go outside. Ya see Cat had a funny foot. Was born with it. Club foot I think they calls it. Anyway, he hadda drag it around an' sometimes people gave him funny looks, like maybe he wasn't a real person. An' Cat, he didn't never laugh, 'cept when we was drinkin'. Had a real long, brown face an' his eyes was kinda popped. Guess it was from sittin' in Jimson's too much. Seems like he never liked bein' outside in the light. He sure as hell liked hearin' them balls though, an' wasn't a day passed that Shakey didn't rack 'em up. An' wasn't a day passed that Cat wasn't listenin'.

I moved into the chair next to Cat an' I could see his face in the shadows. His eyes was closed an' looked like he was prayin'.

"We got it Cat. We got that damn money. An' we is gonna have us a fine time tonight. You listenin'?"

He opened his eyes real wide an' looked like he was

lookin' right through me. Then he smiled an' I knowed everything was good.

Fat Shakey had just racked 'em up an' busted 'em, an' Cat closed his eyes.

"Polo," he whispered. "We ain't got much time."

"What the hell you talkin' about, Cat. Got six, seven hours."

"Seen it Polo. Was thinkin' real hard an' I seen it." Cat always got like this. Tellin' me he always seen stuff.

"Sure Cat," I said, "Some nice lady's got some apples waitin' for us. She don't know it, but she's gonna make us some money. Let's get goin'. Wouldn't be too nice makin' her wait."

I got up an' moved toward the door. Cat got up behind me an' while we was goin' I could hear his foot draggin'. It scraped hard against the floor an' ever' few seconds he breathed real heavy. We moved outa that dark, an' sweat, an' smoke, an' jus' when we was out the door, me an' Cat, we heard Shakey bustin' 'em up again.

The sounds of balls smackin' each other, an' the bell bangin' on the door, an' horns blowin' on the outside all ran together in my head. I couldn't hear Cat's foot draggin' on the concrete 'cause I was still walkin' an' Cat was a block back leanin' up against the door at Jimson's. I turned to yell at him to come on, but when I did the light on some car's windshield hit me in the eyes, an' made me close 'em. When I looked again Cat was next to me. I couldn't see how the hell he got so close to me, so fast. Didn't really matter. We was gonna see the German lady an' get drunk. You bet we was gonna get drunk. Sure as hell was strange the say he done that, though.

"Ah, Polo. Go way. You don' stay mit me today. You maybe buy from me some apples? Nein. All the time ist nein. You want always to talk an' play der games. You dink maybe I Narr, how you say, fool? Today you don' stay mit me."

The fat German lady always wore a big green dress. Looked like she coulda changed sometimes. No, she never changed, an' she always yelled at me that way whenever me an' Cat come up to her.

"How you today Mrs. Getue? Real nice day ain't it? You look awful nice in that dress."

Cat always stood up against the buildin' when I started my pitch. I swear that man coulda melted into that concrete, he was so quiet.

"You no stay mit me today, Polo. I got no time. My stand, she ist not goin' watch herself."

"Now, Mrs. Getue. You know we is friends an' I jus' wanna talk a few minutes." I stuck my arm aroun' her

thick shoulders. Damn that woman smelled funny, an' she always had these silly pins stickin' outa her hair. I walked her out into the sunlight, next to the pole that was melted into the sidewalk. On one side it said 17th street, an' the other said Liberty. Cat moved next to her stand.

"How's your boy, Mrs. Getue? Is he feelin' better?"

"What you say Polo? You think maybe I got boy? You maybe little verrückt, little crazy? I not married Polo. What you say?"

She laughed like some big goose honkin' an' wheezin'

"My mistake, Mrs. Getue. Coulda swore you hadda boy. Be talkin' to you later, Mrs. Getue." I turned an' took off down the street toward the corner o' Jackson an' Ormsby. I was lookin' for Cat an' I couldn't see him nowhere. Then I couldn't see nothin' cause I run smack into Gillespie, an' I fell down on the sidewalk. Little pieces of gravel was stickin' in my hand an' it stung like when you're a kid.

"Busy Polo? Or maybe you got a heavy date? Or maybe you think the rest of us should walk on the other side of the street?"

"Damn sorry Gillespie. Didn't see you standin' there."

He stood real straight an' started fingerin' the butt of his gun. The sunlight shined on his badge an' it made my eyes hurt. He breathed right into my face an' wasn't nobody in the world coulda tol' me that man, that outstandin' cop, hadn't been drinkin'. Could smell it clear as day, an' it was thick an' heavy. His eyes was black and cold an' he jus' stood there. Didn't say nothin'. Didn't have to. I moved to his left (Cat must a been scared about where I was), an' started down the street.

"Stay outa my sight you good for nothin' bastard," he screamed and smacked me across the back of the head.

Wasn't right what he done. He always hated me an' damned if I knew why.

My head was stingin' an' I was runnin' toward Lombardo's.

Wasn't right what he done. I was scared an' I didn't know why. The man hated me an' I didn't know why. He always hated me. I think he hated me before I was born. I think he always was gonna hate me 'cause that's the way it was. Hated me before there was a me. Always did an' always would.

"Cat. Hey Cat," I screamed.

The back of Lombardo's was our place. We had it an' didn't nobody else use it.

Then I heard it. I heard the scrapin' on the alley floor an' then I saw the brown face with the popped eyes.

"Trouble?" Cat whispered.

"Naw, just that bastard Gillespie. I run into him an' he's been drinkin' again."

"C'mon Polo. We ain't got much time."

"Did you get 'em?" I asked.

"Yea, I got 'em."

Cat opened his big, black pockets an' there was a bunch o' big, red apples.

"Damned if we didn't," I yelled. "Let's go talk to the girls."

It was always a game. Them girls coulda got apples some place else. Don't know if they even wanted 'em. But they always took 'em from me an' Cat. They jus' liked us, an' we didn't never hassle 'em like some o' the other guys. We thought they was OK an' they liked us. Down Market street me an' Cat saw Sandy an' Maggie. Cat always got scared when we hadda see the girls. They sometimes played games with Cat, holdin' on to him an' touchin' him, an' while some guys woulda liked it, Cat never did.

Stead a goin' all the way up to 'em Cat jus' leaned up against the wall. I swear that man almost disappeared.

"Got somethin' for ya, Sandy," I yelled. I walked close to her an' looked at them freckles. Damn, she was cute.

"Polo, I ain't ate since this mornin' an' I sure could use some apples. Me an' Maggie, we likes fruit an' you boys grows the best."

She laughed an' handed me a five. It was always that way. Me, actin' like I got a diamond ring for her an' she actin' like I was givin' her one. It was always a game, an' me an' Cat, we liked them girls a lot.

After we seen the girls, night jumped on us.

Night time in the city ain't no good. Most places gets quiet in the dark. The city don't get quiet. Seems like they's a war goin' on with night wantin' to have its time, an' the city kickin' hell outa the night with all the lights an' noise. City seems like a big, lazy snake in the day, movin' real thick an' heavy. At night things is different. That big snake curls up an' spits at you, an' wants like hell to bite you or swallow you up. That's what city nights does. They swallows you up, an' chokes you, an' says, "Don't sleep. Move and dance with me 'til I swallows you up."

Me an' Cat, we didn't like the night an' that's why we wanted to feel good an' numb. We wanted to burn that snake outa our guts an' feel quiet. Nobody could hurt us an' we liked it.

The streets around Magnolia seemed like they knowed we had money. I saw faces. Faces that didn't look at us before, smiled. Faces that didn't look at us before, looked now. I know they smiled. They had to. We had money. Only one didn't an' that was Gillespie's, an' what the hell he was doin' comin' outa J&J's I'd like to know.

We moved good. Moved around that snake and pushed our way into J&J's Liquors off o' Magnolia. We had five bucks an' we was thirsty.

The man didn't think we meant business. Jus' looked at us like we was dirt, an' we better get the hell out 'fore we stole somethin'. Bastard didn't know me an' Cat had the cash an' he damn well better treat us good.

The place was empty 'cept for us, an' looked good. I liked lookin' at the bottles standin' straight on the shelves. Almost like they was soldiers an' we was the generals lookin' 'em over. Cat moved slow over to a corner of the store. The lights was kinda bright an' he wasn't smilin'.

"Hey you. Don't touch that," the guy behind the counter was yellin'. He had a red face an' little round glasses. His nose was long an' almost covered his pinched-off mustache.

The guy was yellin' at Cat 'cause he was touchin' a lamp that was blinkin' on an' off. It said, "America's Finest" in yellow letters an' I could see Cat liked it.

"Damn things worth fifty bucks and I know sure as hell you ain't gonna pay for it." The man with the long nose stared at Cat. Cat backed off an' pulled hisself over to me.

"C'mon Polo," he muttered. "Let's get the hell outa here."

"OK Cat." I grabbed a bottle of brown stuff and looked at it. "Heartstone Gold," was on the label an' I smiled at Cat.

"Good stuff. Real smooth stuff," I said to Cat.

He jus' walked to the door an' stood waitin' for me. He looked kinda pale an' he wasn't smilin' like he shoulda been.

I gave the guy our money an' damned if he didn't say, "Thank you, sir," when I turned away. He called me sir, but he was still lookin' at me like I was some-thin' dirty.

Cat didn't say nothin'. Stood real quiet like he was one of them bottles. It was only when he turned to go that he yelled. Caught his foot in the rug, an' I knowed it hurt.

Damn shame we hadda buy the best stuff we ever bought in that place.

We went to our place, back o' Lombardo's grocery. The alley was black, black as hell, an' real quiet. Only the front part was lit in a kinda yellow fog. Out in front was the street light that told anybody who gave a damn, that this was the corner o' Jackson an' Ormsby and Peter Lombardo had a store at this corner. It was our light.

It was like a front porch to some quiet country house. The house wasn't nothin' but a damn alley, but it was quiet and that damn snake didn't know nobody was in there. Snakes is blind you know; can't see worth a damn and if you stays real quiet they ain't gonna bite you. Me an' Cat was gonna be quiet tonight.

I handed the bottle back to Cat. He turned it up an' the yellow stuff ran down his throat. He looked at me an' smiled.

"Time's almost here, Polo."

I didn't know nothin' 'bout no time. My gut was burnin' and did it feel good. The bottle felt good in my hand an' I was goin' swimmin' in my head.

"Hell yes, Cat. Time's almost here. Time's almost here an' we's almost here. We knows it an' don't it feel good. Take another drink Cat. See them boxes over there? They's our boxes. See this alley here. It's our alley."

I passed the bottle back to Cat an' damned if he didn't disappear. He turned into one o' them boxes. Then he turned back into Cat an' I swear that man was there. The walls was goin' over to see where Cat was an' damned if they didn't all turn into boxes.

"Polo," one o' them boxes said. "When we goin' home? When we goin' to Jimson's? I don't like nothin' else an' time's almost here."

I looked real hard at that box. It was Cat talkin' an' I knowed it, but he sure looked like a box.

That's when I heard the shot.

Sounded like a little pop, like maybe a kid's cap gun. Only it came an' our light was blowed out. The light smashed an' pieces flew on top o' me. Things looked clearer then. It was all black now an' things looked real clear.

A man come 'round the corner o' Lombardo's an' shined this light in our eyes.

Some voice that said, "Stay outa my sight," was yellin' now. I knowed it was Gillespie an' he was breathin' hard and cussin' an' spittin'.

"Some bastard robbed Lombardo's an' I know who done it," he yelled.

"Gillespie, we ain't done nothin'. You're drunk."

"I ain't drunk," he screamed. "An' one o' you took that money."

He was still breathin' real hard an' the light was goin' all over the alley. One second it was shinin' on them boxes, then on me, then on a brown face with popped eyes. That's when I saw the gun. It wasn't stuck in his hip. It was in his hand an' he was wavin' it all around. My head was still swimmin', an' I knowed it didn't take too long, but damned if it didn't seem forever. Gillespie waved that gun an' he cussed me. He started chokin', an' that gun was blacker than black, an' it fired, an' it shot holes in the boxes an' tore the side o' Cat's head off. Black blood sprayed all over the back o' the alley, an' I knowed Cat was dead. Gillespie took off runnin' an' there wasn't no more sounds. There wasn't no more Cat neither. I crawled over to them boxes an' I saw what Gillespie done.

Snakes was all around me, an' I didn't care no more if I was swallowed up.

Cat didn't move no more. He jus' laid there. I covered him up with them boxes an' you couldn't see him no more. Only his foot was stickin' out, an' I closed my eyes cause they was cryin'. Everythin' was real quiet an' numb 'cept I kept hearin' this foot scrapin' on the concrete an' fat Shakey bustin' 'em up.

THE WAKE--for joan

Keith Hubbard

It was an abnormal day from the start...
your dog was alive, wheezing under the bed,
even the damned woman in the Whistler print on your wall
looked more forlorn than usual
as I stumbled to the refrigerator,
thirsty with hang-over the dog was alive then,
I'm sure he must have croaked as I sat groaning,
cringing as the morning traffic copter
flew by the bathroom window

when I called to tell you, you came home early,
I brought you a drink when I found you on the porch,
lingering at the door
we drank gin and tonics as I stuffed the dog still warm
and limp into a yard bag on the front porch
by now the day was abnormal as hell...

the dog went into that bag like a club sandwich
forced into an IRS envelope
we finished our drinks watching the rainbows through
the neighbor's lawn sprinkler

you decided to bury the dog in the country,
I remember you told me in the car
how they caught your brother masturbating in his room
at your mother's wake,
actually a perfectly normal thing to do
you said, locking grief out
and Joan, I remember you, the tears finally in the corners
carrying water from that creek for my radiator
as I dug into the fresh earth
we buried him with dope seeds in his grave...

now you live in Connecticut...
that water has long since evaporated from my radiator
your dog fertilizes Kentucky soil
and I think of you often at red lights,
the longing now patient and persistent
as traffic control....



Denise Spaulding

Pyrex

Jeff Wylie

Forty-seven.

Not yet awake, she stared stupidly
At the coffee bubbling in the glass pot.
Still making too much. She hoped
It wouldn't spill through the crack
At the top.

She touched her cheek.
Softly, respectfully. As she
Tucked her hair up under her scarf
She noticed that gray
Felt the same.

She thought about today.
Glad the battles were over.
Good for them both, he had said.
She wondered.
She felt afraid.

Where had he gone?
She creaked upstairs and slowly
Dressed, avoiding the bureau mirror.
It was old, and
Spots of brown were wearing through the silver.

The windows, today, she thought.
And the garden had to be taken
Care of, and there was always the oven.
How did she find time
For anything before?

It Will Never Look the Same

Greg Loomis

Then it seemed there would always be the river,
unchecked and wild, alluring in its power
tearing limbs apart with furious ease.
But on that day
winter stilled the water,
the savage force locked at rest...

Cautiously, the first hesitant step,
then another,
then a cry of laughter--it was ours!
Wariness gave way to unchecked exuberance--
running, sliding over
and across the sleeping mass

Until the crack.

And I knew...
the instant burning flash of regret
falling through the lid into
frigid darkness,
sucking and rushing through me,
lost, clutching blindly for handles to climb
to get up
to get up from
the dark torrent of mad pounding
numbing rage...
And I did come up to meet not
the sky but the roof,
and fear.

Striking and beating carried
on by the dynamo,
helpless in its grasp
losing feeling, wanting to cry
or scream, swallowing at what was already
gone, fighting the crushing urge to open
and take just one--
just one drink, and maybe air?
Please air!

And then it broke.

The blanket which had yielded me so easily
into its depths
yielded once more,

spitting me out to the gray sky
that had never looked quite the same before;
thrusting me out in a shuddering gasp to the wind,
and to a black branch
held out to me.

Standing by the Tracks in Early Morning

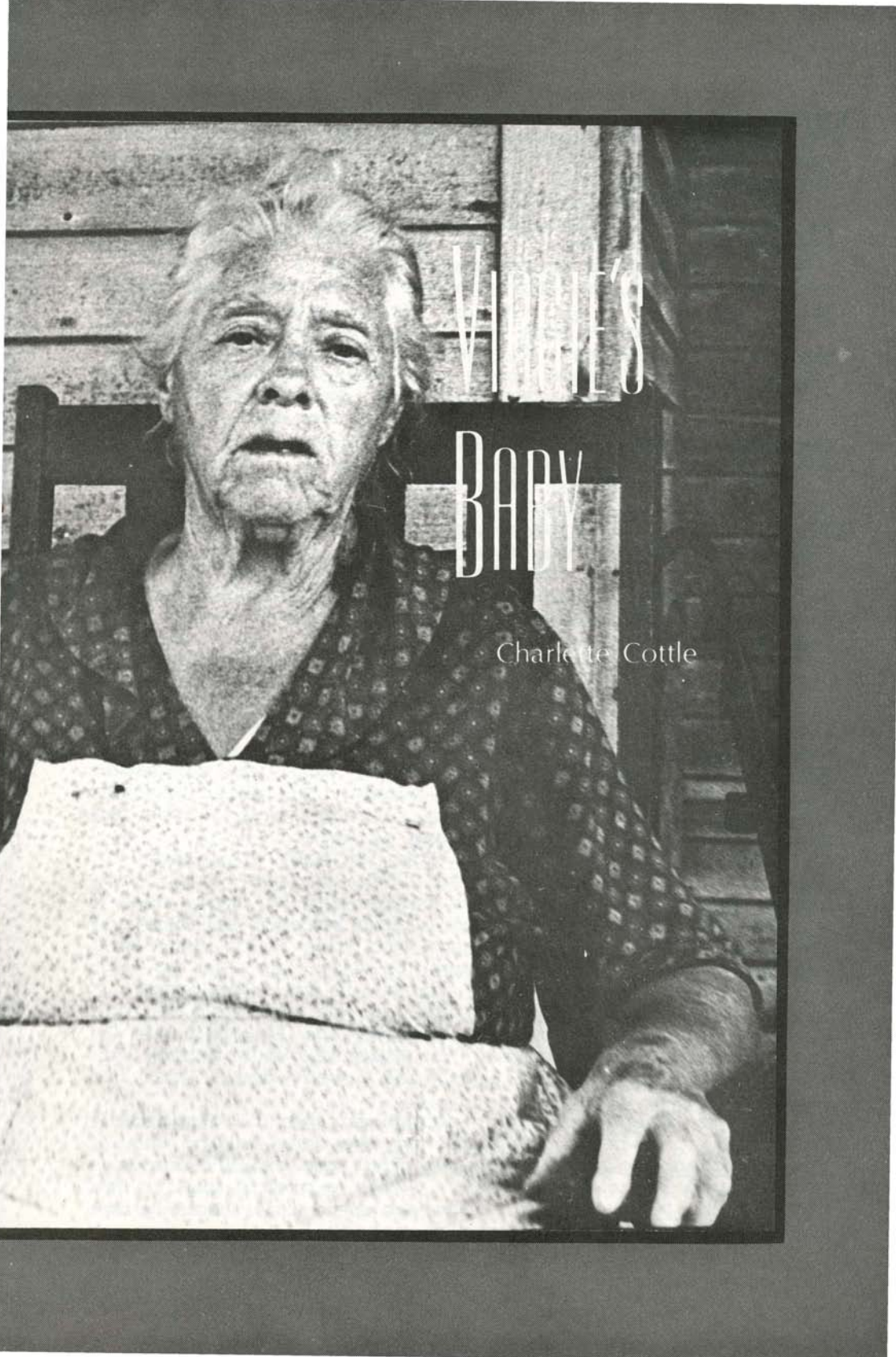
Nancy Pfister

Standing by the tracks tracing
the rails and ties, onward racing
into eternity's yellow glare,
as the sun unbraids her golden hair.

Listening by the tracks alone--
fog blue silence monotone,
until from miles, a stream of red
hurries westward in steaming thread.

Vibrating in two shoes well-grounded;
inside dancing red rebounded.
Puffing harbinger with cargo in store--
neared, arrived, and is no more.





VIRGIL'S BABY

Charlotte Cottle

What?" she whispered as her smoky-gray eyes shifted quickly around the room. "No--" she murmured with a raspy breath. Virgie McGriffen rose from her shabby, worn sofa, placed both withered, coal-stained hands on her face, and paced around the room. Briefly she paused, emitting in a trembling voice, "Excuse me--I didn't see you standing there." She caught her breath, "Oh, it's you--I thought it was someone else." She smiled, running one bent hand through her coarse, matted, gray hair.

"Well, I don't look too pretty today, but I don't mind waltzing a bit." Virgie curtsied and raised her right arm as the music began. Slowly, she turned around the room taking light, swift steps. She threw her head back, laughing at the comment her partner made. She was twirling about then stopped, drew her dusty eyebrows down, and listened intensely.

"What's knocking?" her voice demanded. She turned to the orchestra. "Stop the music! Who's knocking?" She screamed, as she placed both hands over her ears. "Don't beat--don't--oh, the door."

Virgie stalked towards the unpainted door and placed her ear to it. She heard a faint whimper. Her eyes enlarged and danced with quick, jerky movement. "Who's there?"

"Me," a low childish voice said from the other side of the door.

Virgie gently turned the knob of the door, allowing a blade of golden sunlight into the weathered room. By degrees she poked her head around the door's edge. She found on her doorstep a young, skinny girl who was holding a black- and white-spotted puppy. The child pushed the puppy toward Virgie's haggard face, just as the pup discharged a thin, yellow stream of urine.

"Here," the child said, "You can have the puppy because I can't keep it, cause Daddy said it was a girl and it would grow up and have babies and we don't need no more baby dogs." The girl's eyes batted; she frowned at Virgie. "Well, are you goin' to take it or not--if you don't take it Daddy's gonna kill it--he said he would. He said he was goin' to put it in a bag with a big rock in the bag and tie the bag and throw it in the river and the puppy couldn't get out and it would die." The child's voice quivered, "If I don't get somebody to take it he's goin' to kill it, and nobody don't want it because it's a girl."

Virgie opened the door enough for her bird-sized body to slip outside, then closed the door behind her. She snatched the partly wet pup from the child's hands and clasped it to her breast. "It's a pretty pup." She stroked the puppy's head. She spoke to it. "Nobody is going to drown my baby--no sir--nobody."

She held the pup up to her black smeared face; the pup licked Virgie's jaw with its sticky-wet pink tongue. "Aw, it's a smart little fellow. Well, Virgie won't let nobody take you away from her, no sir." She squeezed the pup so hard it yelped. Fearing she had hurt the pup she held it gently close to herself and rhythmically rocked it.

The child lingered on the step, biting her bottom lip, and bending the fingers on one of her hands back. She carefully eyed Virgie and the pup. "Her name is Susie and you have to treat her good."

Virgie bent her head forward. Her face was twisted. "I'm going to be good to my baby. What kind of person do you think I am?" Her voice rose, "You think I'd hurt my own baby?"

The child stepped back not knowing nor understanding. Virgie's eyes blazed at the child, then they softened as she continued to stroke and rock the pup.

"Whose girl are you?" Virgie asked.

"My daddy is Bill Johnson and I'm Beth but you can't tell nobody cause Daddy will whip me for coming here cause I'm not supposed to be here."

Virgie grinned revealing her bare crimson gums, "Well, I won't tell nobody that you came here, no sir. You look like a smart little girl. Do you believe in angels?"

Beth wrinkled up her nose, and turned her head slightly to one side.

Virgie glanced quickly from right to left, then whispered to Beth, "Angels are all around you know. Sometimes at night I turn over and there is one sitting right on my bed." Her eyes widened as she conveyed her secret to the child. "Yes sir, right there in the bed, looking at me." Virgie gave a deep breath. "Look!" She pointed a crooked finger in the direction of the hillside. "See those white icicles? What do you think about them? I think they're pretty." Virgie loosened one hand and tugged at the faded woolen scarf which was tied around her neck. She peered at the child while she pinched her lips tightly together. "I'm going to die," she muttered. "Do you suppose dying will hurt? Lordy," she answered her own question, "I know it will; they say it is a choking, smothering pain. Oh, honey, it sure will hurt. Can you read?"

Beth nodded her head as she edged back another step.

"I love to read Shakespeare, and the Bible," Virgie explained. "I like the Bible, but I don't go to Church because the people are all funny. They don't act right, always screaming and hollering like they think they can get to Heaven by hollering. No sir, you can't get to Heaven that way." She shook her head and looked down at the pup.

"You have any pictures?" Virgie asked Beth.

Beth shook her head--no.

"You see those icicles?--they will most likely melt this summer, but I'll be dead and won't see them melt. Virgie lowered her head as her eyes brimmed with tears, "I'll die and leave my baby with nobody." She dropped down on the step, buried her face in the pup's coat, and cried. The pup struggled to be free. It yelped as Virgie anchored it in her arms. She became aware of the pup's fear.

"Oh, baby, I'm so sorry I hurt you; I'll never hurt you again." She bent her head and kissed the pup. As she rose to take the pup inside she noticed the girl had disappeared. Without further thought she opened the door, went in, and shut it behind her.

For hours she rocked and sang to the pup. When its yelping became unbearable she placed it on the floor, went across the room, and lifted a can of evaporated milk from a cardboard box. Virgie opened the milk and attempted to pour the contents down the pup's throat. The pup struggled against her, spitting back the foamy, cream-colored milk.

"Now, baby, you shouldn't be bad," she said as she wiped the pup's mouth with the sleeve of her dirty, green dress.

She placed the pup on the floor, letting it wander aimlessly about the dark dusty room. It stumbled over empty cans, old boxes, and human waste. Finally, the pup crawled under the one piece of furniture--the sofa. It propped its head on its paws and watched Virgie with tired, scared eyes.

"Yes," Virgie paced the floor, "I do agree but can we be sure?" She turned about in a circle twisting her hands. She walked to the door, opened it and went out. Once outside she crossed the bare frozen earth and headed for the highway. Virgie smiled to herself as she took the scarf from her neck and placed it on her head. A car approached, and she jumped into the frozen ditch line, hunched down, and turned her face toward the hill. After the car passed she rose and continued her journey.

The sun lay at the edge of the earth shooting final red-orange blazes across a gray sky. The bitter coolness had settled upon the area causing Virgie's breath to come out in white clouds. Her teeth chattered as she made her way to her neighbor's coal pile. Cautiously, she reached it and looked around nervously for signs of Franklin Hinkle.

Not seeing him anywhere, Virgie reached down and lifted a block of jet-black coal into her arms. As she turned, a voice bellowed from the house, "Virgie, you thief, you witch, put that down. You're stealin' me blind!"

Virgie turned her wrinkled pale face towards Franklin. "It's for the baby, not me," she said coldly.

Franklin broke in, "You old fool, you hain't got no baby. Your baby was killed years ago."

"No," Virgie explained, "It's a new baby of mine-- a pup."

Franklin boomed back, "You ain't takin' my coal to burn for some flea-bitten mutt."

"An angel brought it to me--a little golden-haired angel. You're not goin' to let it freeze are you, Franklin?" she asked.

Franklin squared his jaw, and gritted his teeth. "Virgie, I'm a warnin' you for the last time. You put that coal down or I'll come down an' take it right out of your thievin' hands."

Virgie dropped the coal, "Well, it isn't like I was stealin...."

"Hell, no you ain't stealin'," Franklin said.

Virgie gazed into his strong tan face, turned and walked back to her shell of a house. By the time she reached it the sun had dropped and darkness prevailed. She crawled up on the sofa, clutching the pup close to her, and slept.

Early in the morning Virgie woke with a start. "What?" she said. "Oh, no please don't take my baby." She grasped the cold, stiff pup to her face. She cried and prayed until yellow strands of light filtered through the cracks in the wall. Then she rose, laid the pup in an old box, turned, and said, "You know I don't look too pretty today, but I might waltz awhile." She smiled as the orchestra struck up the music.

Withheld

Greg Loomis

They can leave us here
if they please.
With the bang-scrape of brutal iron,
the hymnal breathing in symphonic wheeze,
gathered and huddled to their knees lying
formless, with shadowed faces.

Indignant church and no cross to bear
they worship for a bottle and air,
crawl and crumble at the enamel altar
to hang a head and pray.

We know there will be time--
counted
by grunts and restless twistings,
phlegm throats clearing along stone
floors damp and thick,
darkened voices from corner cells
carried by the bitter urine and flesh,
murmuring, falling
silent...
as the eternal night rolls.
We can sleep--
sleep,
till there's nothing left
but awake.

There will be time to know each other--
you in your anger,
me in my pain;
pinned between fatigued green walls
cramped and stilled by the steel-latticed door,
cornered--
When you drift from your dreams
I'll be in them,
and I'll scream for you in my nightmares.

Hands under the door
to awaken in us the sweat
of the day,
meaning tripe and eggs
nothing more.
And the first one to leave
is despised--
and the last one remaining

is forgotten
in the day--
Is it day?
Or just the fractured light
of a single bulb
sheathed in wire.



Mike Goodlett

A Housewife Reads Redbook on Halloween Eve

Keith Hubbard

Poets there will always be time
for your works to be consumed

Coming home from the Country Club...read this
while your wife shucks off make-up
with the bathroom door ajar
you light a smoke, restless, turn on the TV
"yes folks, I can sell you a mobile home
for less than the price of a new automobile" click.

Now you sit smoking become aware of your daughter
somewhere exchanging fingers on the rear altar of a Fury
could you know the driver turned sixteen the day you sold

downtown property for twice what you paid for it?
you smile now with the pleasure you felt
when the old lush lawyer had to take a new office
above a run-down Bake Shop

the toilet sings, your wife now enters the bedroom,
magazine in hand, you stare through the three diamonds
in your front door in the time it would have taken
to read this poem, you watch fascinated
as little goblins
stomp the neighbor's jack-o-lantern
into crazy jagged bits of crooked smile....

A Free Lunch

Sylvia Wilson

Pardon me? Uh,...what hand?

Oh, the hand that's in your pocket?

Well, you see, I lost a locket and thought it may have fallen there unnoticed.

What did you say?

Why, yes, you are comparatively taller than myself. What of it?

Oh, you're saying that my locket, then, fell up.

Well, the strangest things do happen anymore.

In fact, it's very difficult to tell

Exactly who the man is you may trust.

Why, just the other day I said to Hazel,

"What ever happened to the honest worker,

Who never would have taken one small dime.

Or loafed away his time. His day is passed."

Yes, sir, if there's a thing that I despise

It's a man who's wise to lyin'

and isn't worth a bit of earthly good.

Now, I'm not one for gossip. But did ya hear

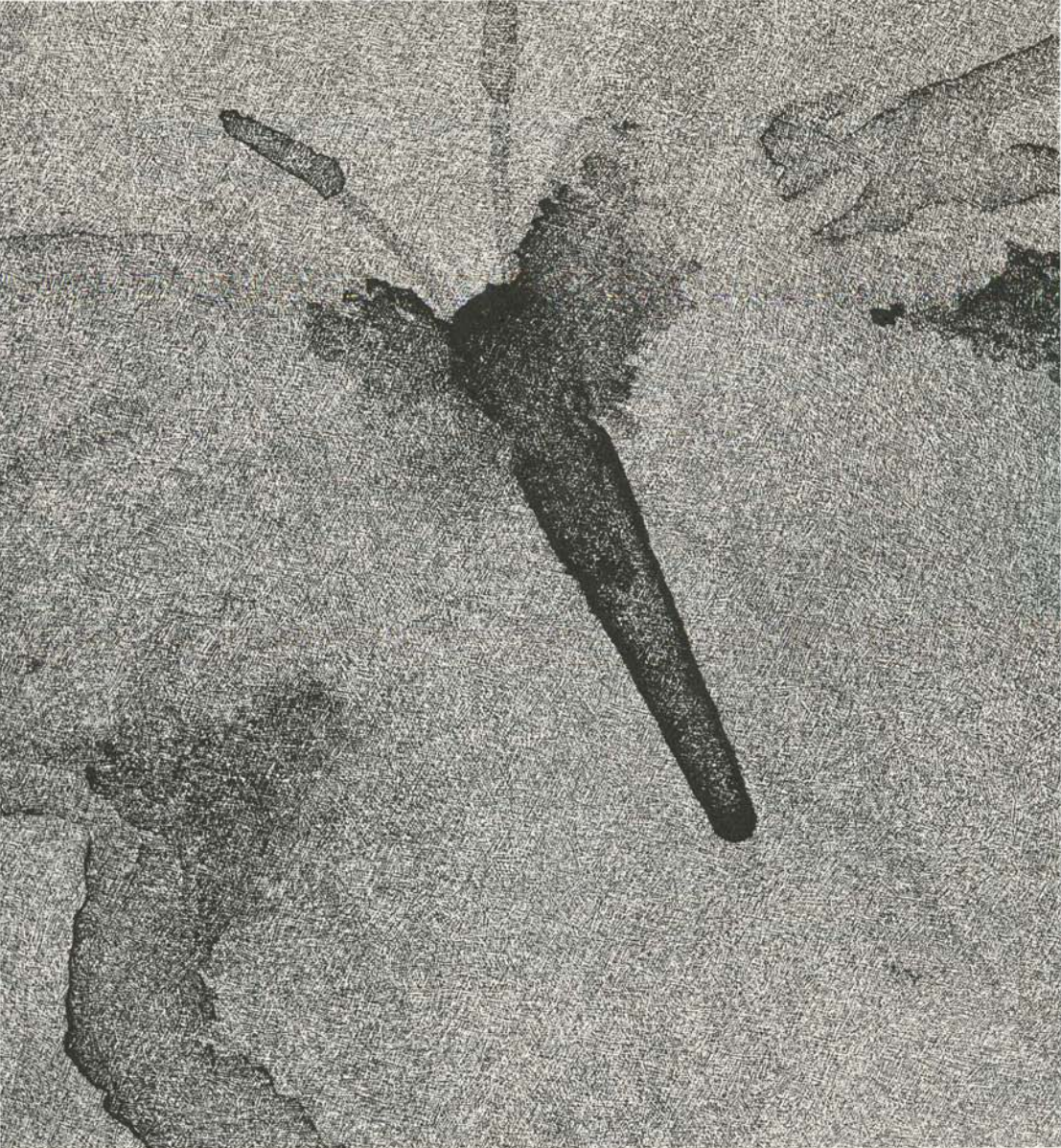
About ol' Delmer Keaton? They busted him fer cheatin' at the plant. Fired him just like that!

Just served him right. Shouldn't stick his hands where they've no business.

What did you say?

Would I mind to buy your lunch?

Why, not at all.



O Butterfly

Susan Schrage

O butterfly
with your fluttering aimless flight
your gold-flecked wings of black velvet
flittered among the floating daisy heads
of a field by a farmer's country road
until a final flight
finished your life
splat
on my windshield.

ROCKS

Anthony Lococo

I know for a fact, from livin' all my 'leven years, three months and sixteen days, that they's three kinds a' people in this world. First off they's good people. You don' never hear or see too much of 'em 'cause they's only a few of 'em walkin' around. All the other good-uns is dead--or real old, and most of 'em lived in the Bible, two, maybe three hunnerd years ago. 'Bout the only good person I know for sure is Miss Maggie. She stays with the Shepherds an' sets in a orange rockin' chair most all the time. I heerd from J.C. (we'll talk more 'bout him later) that she's a hunnerd years old, an' got rumitisim, an' that's why she smiles all the time. Now keep in mind, J.C. don' always git his facts straight--but it is for sure that Miss Maggie does smile at ever' person that walks past the Shepherd place--an' somethin' else--she holds a basket a' eggs in her lap. Smiles and holds them eggs. Can't nobody say Miss Maggie ain't a good person. She's real good.

'Fore I tells you 'bout the second kind a' people, let me tells you why heavy thoughts like I'm sayin' is comin' outa the mouth of a 'leven year old. Fer three 'ires I been sittin' under this here bridge, which is me an' J.C.'s favorite secret place; an' since my pickles run out they ain't been nuthin' else ta do. I ain't goin' home neither, an' it's my ma's fault. She don' understand the way things is. I guess she's all right sometimes, but they's times when a fella gotta decide his future, an' I done jus' that. Let me tell ya I ain't in no laughin' mood. They's times when I needs ta lay back an' think, an' this here's th' place where I do my best thinkin'.

If they's a heaven--an' Preacher Ramey done tol' us they was--then I hopes it looks like this. Purtiest place in th' world--Shack's Mountain over to the right there, an' to the left they's McPherson's corn field. When it's October, like it is now, an' the air's real crisp, me an' J.C. most always comes here an' talks. J.C. ain't here now 'cause he done somethin' that was best not done--he laughed. Wasn't funny neither. I tol' him, real serious like, what I was gonna do with my life, an' you know what he said? He said, "Harley, that's the craziest, stupidest, most dumb thing I ever heerd." Then he commenced ta laughin'. That's when I hit him in the eyeball, an' come here. That's right--went home first ta get my pickles, then I come here.

Boy, oh boy--I jus' seen a silver streak next to that stump. That's Old Jason--biggest, meanest, hardest-to-catch bass in this here water.

Anyway, like I was sayin'; 'bout a week ago, on a Monday sittin' in Miss McCreary's scientific class, was when I decided my life's callin'. We jus' got done tearin' up frogs the week before--Dolly Swenson threw up

three times--I traded mine with Little Joey 'cause his was bigger--an' then she commenced ta tellin' us 'bout how old these rocks was. She said they was a million years old. Now I don' take kindly to folks lyin' to me. Pa always said, "Harley, any man what listens to a liar is a bigger fool than the fool who's lyin'." That's a heavy thought, an' I listens to heavy thoughts. Anyway, Miss McCreary ain't never lied to us before, so I raises my hand an' says, "Miss McCreary, I seen these here rocks over by Grayson's barn an' ever'body knows the Grayson place ain't more'n six, seven years old." I looked over to J.C. an' he was noddin' like he was thinkin' the same thing. Miss McCreary walked over to me an' smiled. She's prob'ly the purtiest lady I ever seen, an' she's always smellin' sweet, like molasses. She looks down at me an' says, "Harley, rocks were here long before there were people. The earth is over four billion years old." Then she smiles, showin' all her teeth, an' starts to draw on the board. Now I just sat there fer a minute tryin' to figur' out what a 'billun' is. I figur'd it must be 'bout six hundred years. I looked over to J.C. an' he was sleepin'. He always goes to sleep when Miss McCreary draws on the board. About that time Dolly Swenson made a noise an' runs outa the room--I swear that girl's got a problem--an' Miss McCreary runs after her. Well they wasn't nuthin' ta do 'cept sit an' look at my rock. It was gray, an' lumpy, an' had little colored specks on it.

I punched J.C. in the arm an' he jumped up. "What you do that fer, Harley? I'm tired."

"Look here, J.C.," I says. "Ain't these rocks neat? I like doin' these bettern' frogs, don' you? Let me lookit your rock." J.C. slammed his rock down on my desk an' stared at me like I was crazy. Little Joey starts cryin' 'cause he thought we was gonna fight. Right then Miss McCreary an' Dolly come back in--Dolly looked kinda green--an' Miss McCreary starts talkin' 'bout rocks again.

"The study of the earth's crust and minerals," she says, "is called geology and one who studies this is a geologist. Would somebody please wake J.C. up?"

I punched him again an' ever'body started laughin', an' then the bell rang tellin' us ta go home. When I was walkin' past Miss McCreary I asked her if they was really people who looked at rocks for a livin'. She smiled an' put her hand on my shoulder--an' tol' me yes they was, an' how she knew a man who went all over the world lookin' fer 'em. Well, let me tell ya--what with her smilin' at me, an' smellin' good, an' puttin' her hand on my shoulder--wasn't nuthin' I could do 'cept decide then an' there what my life's callin' was. I was gonna be a g'ologist. Let me tell ya, I left that room

a happy man.

J.C. was waitin' outside standin' on the fire hydrant. He was throwin' rocks at the "Slow Children" sign.

"Don' be throwin' 'em," I says.

"Throwin' what?"

"Them rocks."

"Why not?"

"Cause they's the tools a' my life's callin' J.C..
Me an' Miss McCreary talked it over."

"You're nuts, Harley."

"Am not, J.C."

"Are to. You're crazier'n Old Man Jenkins, an' he eats raw potatoes all day. Last week you was gonna be a...bio...bio..., anyway you was gonna study frogs for a livin'."

"That was last week an' this week's different,
J.C."

I was sure gittin' fed up.

"Last week ain't no different than this week, an' you're nuts, an' besides I think you got somethin' for Miss McCreary."

"Do not."

"Do to."

"Do not, J.C."

"Do to, Harley."

Right then I couldn't take no more. I stomped his foot an' took off toward home.

'Bout now it's gittin' on t'ored four o'clock an' I'm kinda hungry. Along with my pickles, which I already ate, I got me a can a' sardines. Sardines is really neat. They's brain food. Pa tol' me so, an' he oughta know. My pa's a real smart man. All the time sayin' deep things.

Yes sir, I shore like this place. The leaves is startin' ta turn now--be fire red 'fore long. That's what I likes best. I likes it when the air gets crisp an' the leaves turns fire red. Makes you feel like the world is doin' things jus' fer you--like God went an' turned over some paint buckets jus' for you.

Anyway, like I was sayin', me an' J.C. didn't--an' still don't--see eye to eye 'bout my life's callin'. Day after I stomped his foot, he runs up to me after--didn't say two words to me durin'--school an' says, "Harley, what say we go down to th' creek an' hunt rocks?"

I looked at him funny. He wasn't actin' hisself.

"J.C., you ain't changed your mind has ya'? I mean 'bout me an' my life's callin'?"

"Sure Harley. I changed my mind. Jus' 'cause you punched me twice an' stomped my foot yesterday don' mean I'm still mad."

"You shore?"

"Shore, I'm shore. Let's go git them rocks." He handed me a big 'tater sack an' says, "You gotta git 'em while they's fresh. They's only fresh 'round creeks. You understan', Harley?"

"'Course I understan'. You think I'm stupid?"

I didn't want J.C. thinkin' he knowed more 'bout rocks than me. Well anyways, soon as we got there J.C. starts a'yellin' an' jumpin'.

"Got to," he says, when I ask why he's doin' that. "Read me a book on rocks Harley, an' it says you got to scare the rocks 'fore ya catch 'em. 'Sides that, I talked ta Miss McCreary, an' she says it's so."

Well, that was good 'nough for me, 'cause Miss McCreary don't never lie. So I commenced ta jumpin' an' dancin' like J.C., an' scoopin' them rocks into the sack. Them rocks was heavy an' it took both of us--restin' ever' now an' then--ta git them rocks to th' house. Lucky thing Ma was in town an' Pa was plowin', 'cause we'd a' never got that bag a' rocks under my bed with them watchin'.

It was gittin' on t'ored suppertime, an' J.C. had ta leave. I thanked him fer helpin' me, an' told him I was sorry I stomped his foot yesterday. He says that's O.K. an' leaves.

'Fore I fergets, I got ta tell ya' 'bout Runny. Runny is my brother. He's nine an' three quarters, an' I ain't sure he ain't watchin' me right now. Runny watches me all the time, an' tells Ma everything I do, 'cept sometimes he don't tell right away. That's 'cause he's a curse ta me.

Everthin' was goin' fine for two days, what with me an' J.C. scarin' rocks, an' bringin' 'em home--we hadda put 'em in th' closet after awhile--an' nobody knowin' nothin' 'bout it.

Comes Friday night--yea, I think it was. Me an' Runny, an' Ma an' Pa is eatin' supper when Runny starts a' laughin' outa nowhere.

I knowed somethin' was up 'cause we was eatin' succatash, an' Runny hates succatash, an' don't never laugh 'bout havin' ta eat it. Anyway, he busts out an' Pa stares at him.

"Don't laugh with your mouth full," Ma says.

Runny swallows an' says, "Harley's gone crazy Ma."

I dropped my fork an' stared at him.

"Don't say that about your brother," Ma says.

Then Runny commences ta wavin' his arms an' says, "Ma, it's true. I seen 'im an' J.C. down by the creek an' they was sayin' funny words, an' yellin' an' dancin' an' pickin' up rocks--an' you know what, Ma? Harley's got a whole room full a' rocks."

Ma dropped her fork, an' 'fore I could punch Runny, she runs ta my room. I heard this groanin', an' she's

tryin' ta push my door ta git in, but the rocks is blockin' the way.

"Seth," she yells. "Seth, come quick."

Pa grabs his fishin' pole, an' runs out th' front door like he knowed what was comin'.

"Harley Joseph Caldwell get in here." Seems like Ma wanted my attention 'cause she wasn't whisperin', an' she grabbed my ear real hard.

"Why are rocks all over yer room? You know I been goin' crazy--what with cousin Eula's weddin', an' me havin' ta make the dress--an' when I want you boys to act decent, what happens?--you fill up yer room with rocks."

"But Ma..."

"Harley, why is rocks all over yer room?"

"Well Ma, ya see..."

"I don't know what I'm gonna do with ya, Harley."

"But Ma, it's my life's callin'." I yelled at the top a' my lungs, an' Ma jus' stared at me.

"What is?" she asked.

"Rocks is."

"Rocks is what?"

"They's my life's callin', Ma. Miss McCreary told us 'bout g'ologists, an' goin' all over th' world, an' it's what I want ta do, Ma."

"What you gonna do with the rocks, Harley?"

"I ain't real sure, Ma, but first I gotta collect 'em so I'll have plenty to work with once I'm old enough ta do it."

"Do what?"

"I told ya, I ain't sure Ma, but it's real important work, an' soon as I find out what it is, an' how ta do it, I'm gonna do it. Meantime I gotta make sure nobody else gits these rocks. They's mine, 'cause me an' J.C. caught 'em."

"You did what?"

"We caught 'em, Ma, jus' the way the book said to."

"What book?"

"J.C.'s."

"Go to bed, Harley. I want them rocks out tomorrow. I don't want ya goin' nowhere this weekend."

"But Ma..."

That was when she turned red in the face, an' I went ta bed.

Took me right on through the weekend ta git that room lookin' clean. One thing though--I did hear Ma an' Pa talkin' on Sunday after church.

"Seth," Ma says, "I'm worried 'bout Harley. Runny told me how J.C. an' Harley was dancin' and yellin'. It ain't right the way he's thinkin' about rocks. Tell me, Seth--are you listenin'?--was you doin' that when you was his age? Well, was ya?"

Pa jus' says, "Nope." Then Ma's voice got real high.

"This boy oughta be keepin' snakes an' frogs--somethin' 'sides rocks. Maybe we oughta go see Preacher Ramey--somethin's gotta be done, Seth--you should've seen that boy's room. Rocks all over the place--in the bed, in the closet, on the floor--it was a sight. Are you listenin', Seth?"

It was then that I heard a snorin' sound, an' somebody hittin' somebody with a newspaper.

Weren't no doubt--by Monday I was feelin' real mixed up. After all, schools is where you learn ta do your life's work once you pick it out. So I goes an' picks one out, an' my own ma says not ta do it. Yes sir, by Monday I was doin' some serious thinkin'.

I walks in the classroom ready ta git some things straight. Somethin' was wrong though. We wasn't doin' rocks no more in scientific class, an' now we was gonna look at bugs in water. Miss McCreary had a thing called a micrascope, an' we was gonna take turns lookin' in it.

Jus' when we was linin' up ta look I raised my hand.

"Yes, Harley?"

"How come we stopped doin' rocks?"

"Well, Harley, I think we covered them quite well and now it's time to study something else."

"It ain't fair."

"What ain't fair, Harley?"

"My ma says I can't be no g'ologist."

"Why not?"

"She says it's unChristian ta yell, an' dance, an' pick up rocks ta bring home, like some unsaved pagan. If it weren't fer cousin Eula's wedding I think she was gonna come ask ya 'bout it."

"Harley, what are you talking about?"

"You know--what you told J.C.--'bout how to capture rocks for g'ology--how you said ta yell an' scare 'em first."

Right then J.C. busted out laughin'.

"I'm sorry, but I think J.C.'s pulling your leg," she said. Then she smiled real big.

Little Joey starts laughin' too, an' says, "Gee, Harley, rocks ain't got no eyes an' ears. How you gonna scare 'em? I thought you was smart, Harley."

I jus' looked hard at Joey, an' then he wasn't laughin' no more.

I sat down real quiet like, an' believe me I weren't thinkin' 'bout no bugs in water while I looked at 'em.

J.C. took off after school, an' I finally caught him at the creek. He was fishin'.

"Why'd you lie, J.C.?" You made me look real dumb."

"Harley, anybody dumb enough ta believe that story gits what he gits."

"You shouldn't a' done it, J.C."

"You know what rocks is fer, Harley? They's fer skippin', an' fer throwin' at crows, an' fer layin' there. That's all, Harley. They ain't fer scarin' an' they ain't fer draggin' home like some idiot. I nearly busted a gut ta keep from laughin' all th' time we was bringin' home them rocks. You know what, Harley?--you got rocks in your head, that's what."

Then he started laughin', an' that's when I punched his eyeball. Went home, got some pickles an' sardines, an' come here.

I been doin' a whole lot a' serious thinkin' 'bout how J.C. tricked me, an' I ain't sure if me an' him is gonna be best friends no more. He's all the time tryin' ta trick me, an' like Pa says, "When the dogs is barkin', take 'em huntin'." Yes sir, my pa's a deep thinker.

There--over on the hill Runny's comin', an' I'll bet he's gonna tell me it's time fer supper. I hope we're havin' succatash.



The Ground-hog Hunt

Keith Hubbard

The clouds begin to huddle
no stranger to this summer slaughter
electricity flashed in the air
as my grandfather fed his Remington

That morning, the farmer opened his gates
with a smile of recognition,
"Ever' summer I lose a cow or two,
they break their legs in them damned woodchuck holes,
after ya'll git a few, come on up to the house
and have some Orange Crush"

I retrieve them in burlap bags
the colors of this slaughter
run like Pennzoil in water
the blue of bulging intestines
you will find turquoise lining the eye sockets...vacant

We had shot two when the rain started,
when the lightning struck nearby,
I took the rifle down off my shoulder
pointed its blue barrel straight ahead
as we walked toward the car

The farmer was not in control...

lightning had charged from the huddle
his woman lay by the barn at the bottom of a ladder
her head charred and split like a coconut
my grandfather's strong hands smelled of gunpowder
as he turned my seven-year-old head
steered me back to the car
the rain fell in sheets as we followed the ambulance
slowly toward town

Grandad--years later I recall the anger in the clouds
I turn my head away as they lower you
where no cow has broken a leg....

Lost and Found Blues

Nancy Pfister

He's been getting lost
in the blues again--
mourning coffin pockets
whose thin copper soul lies
pressed between two silver plates--
getting lost for want of more.
Fine

but give me blue
as in feather-flapping bluejay,
content with spring-cool showers,
singing soft song sonnets,
and I'll find myself
in bluejay sky of blue.

Stick Out Your Tongue

Anthony Lococo

Wasn't no way.

--No way they was gonna get me
ta open up.

Doc Fogerty, (lookin' like he
was tryin' to sell ice cream),
says, "stick out your tongue";

--an' I says, "No way."

I ain't forgot how they tricked Joe.

--stuck out his tongue once
an' hadda get a operation.

Got Joe, but they ain't gettin' me.

No sir.

Wasn't no way.

People is all the time tryin' ta
trick ya.

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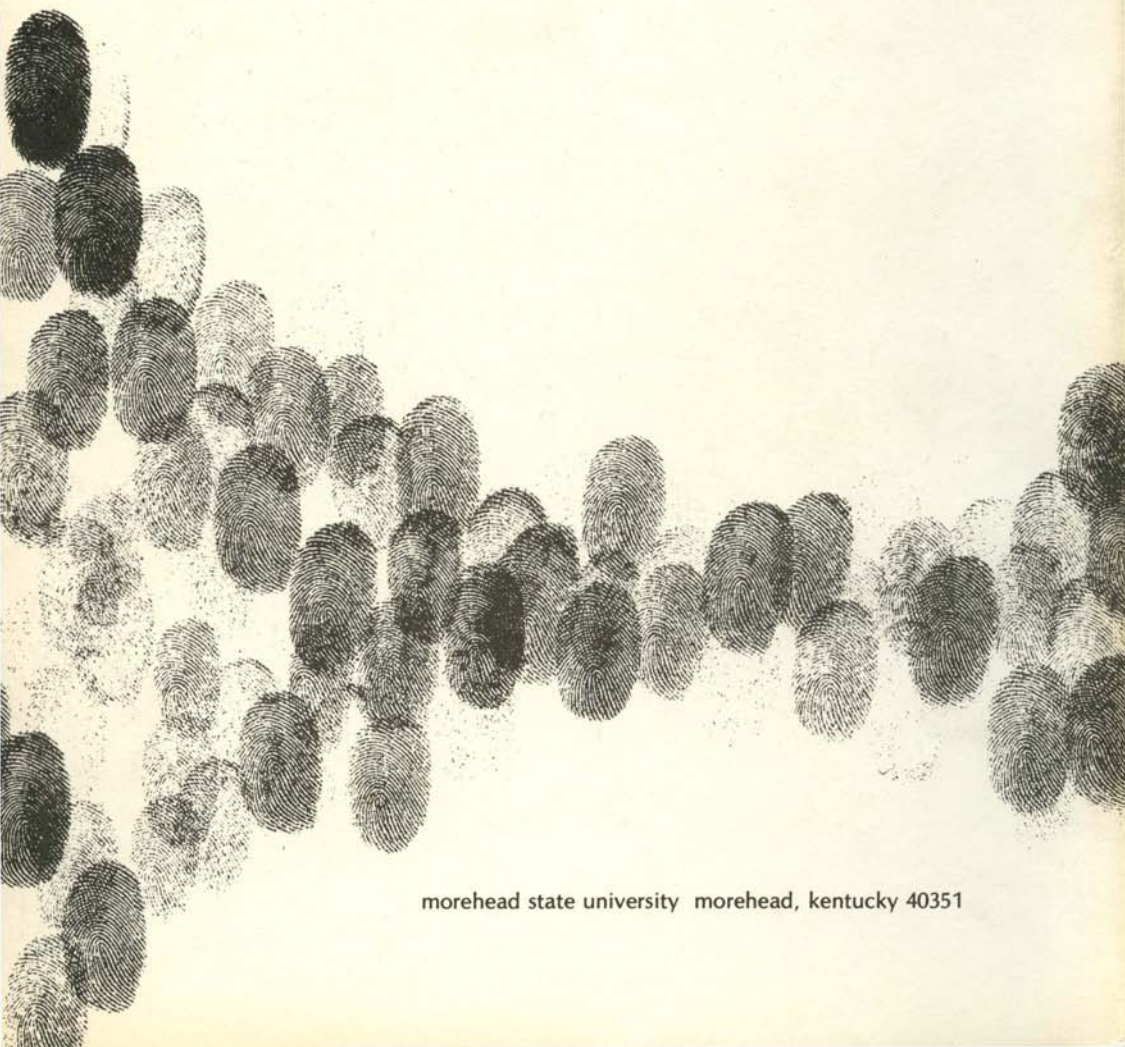
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